Taking a Dip

By Lt. Josh Potocko

Goal: To increase awareness of fatigue risks, specifically as they relate to night carrier ops among naval aviators.

Summary: Night cat shot, S-3B pilot did not sufficiently rotate aircraft, aircraft settled off deck, flew about 20 feet off the water.

Sequence of Events:

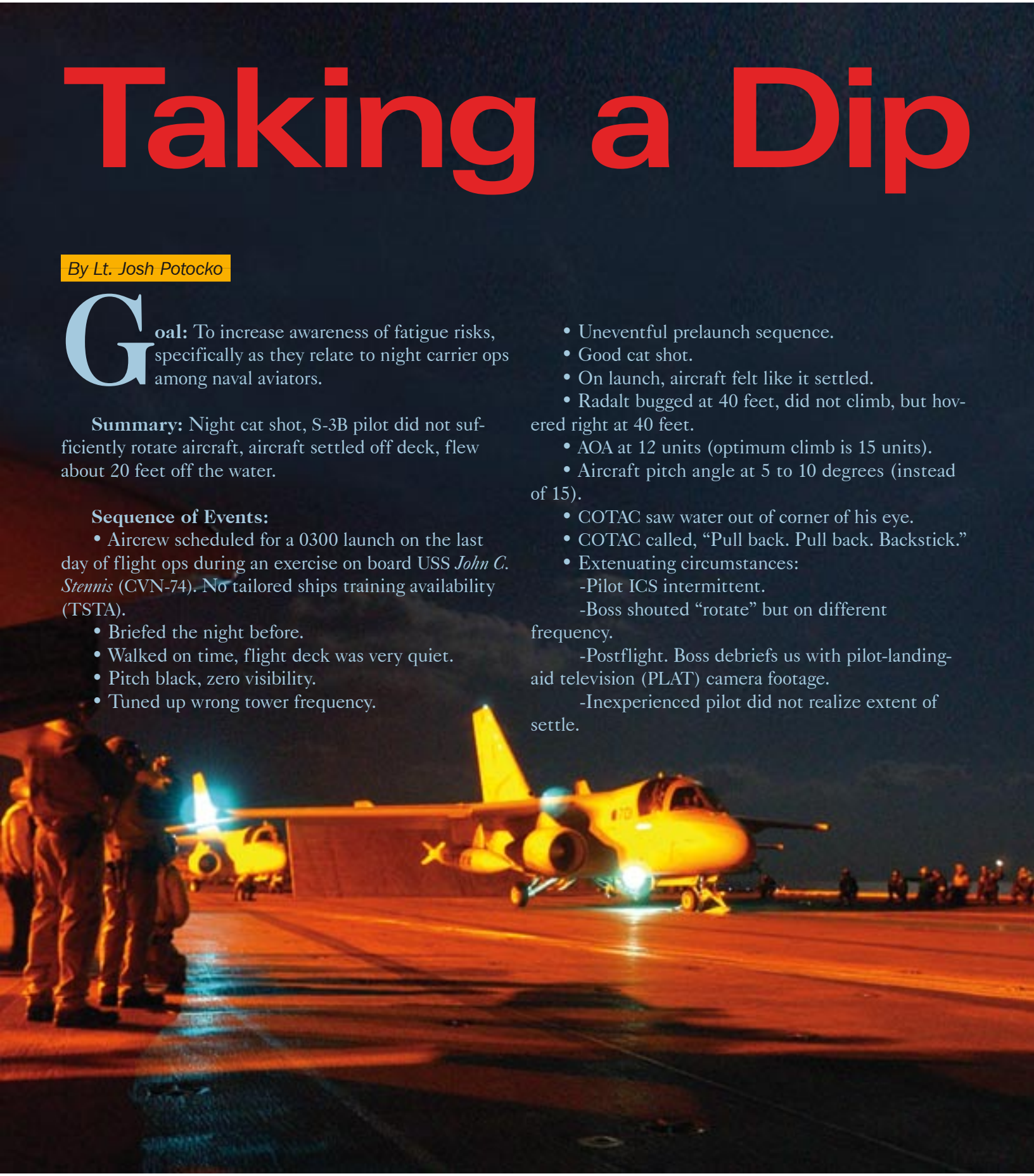
- Aircrew scheduled for a 0300 launch on the last day of flight ops during an exercise on board USS *John C. Stennis* (CVN-74). No tailored ships training availability (TSTA).
- Briefed the night before.
- Walked on time, flight deck was very quiet.
- Pitch black, zero visibility.
- Tuned up wrong tower frequency.
- Uneventful prelaunch sequence.
- Good cat shot.
- On launch, aircraft felt like it settled.
- Radalt bugged at 40 feet, did not climb, but hovered right at 40 feet.
- AOA at 12 units (optimum climb is 15 units).
- Aircraft pitch angle at 5 to 10 degrees (instead of 15).
- COTAC saw water out of corner of his eye.
- COTAC called, "Pull back. Pull back. Backstick."
- Extenuating circumstances:

  -Pilot ICS intermittent.

  -Boss shouted "rotate" but on different frequency.

  -Postflight. Boss debriefs us with pilot-landing-aid television (PLAT) camera footage.

  -Inexperienced pilot did not realize extent of settle.



Question: When does it make sense to fly a four-hour surface surveillance and control (SSC) mission that launches at 0300 on the last day of an at-sea period?

Answer: If you are a JO—never. Because that's when we get our beauty sleep. Plus, mid-rats you've barely had time to digest.

However, people with eagles and stars on their collars see things differently. When kicking purple-country butt during a final battle problem, they see no better way to finish off our enemies (thus allowing an early flyoff) than to throw the all-weather, multi-mission, super-tactical Hoov at them when they least expect it.

We were on USS *John C. Stennis* during a CompTuEx off the southwest California coast. The ship had not had an air wing on board for over a year and a half. CVW-14 just had cross-decked from USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN-72), after completing a 10-month cruise six months earlier. One month at sea had made the two CVs begin to feel like a team. They had suffered together through poor weather and high sea states. The general-quarters drills were plentiful, but at least we looked forward to the food.

I eagerly anticipated the last day of flight ops. This at-sea period was my last with VS-35, as I was scheduled to rotate in the spring. I anticipated taking my last look at the back of a flight deck, which left me with simultaneous feelings of nostalgia and relief.

I had been assigned to fly with the two newest members of our command, not for the flyoff but for a long and painful SSC. We were to hunt for bad guys hiding from our battle group. I knew the mission had increased risks: mainly flying without much sleep. But, I also was confident in the nugget pilot because he already had demonstrated his abilities.

We decided as a crew to brief the night before so we could minimize our sleep loss. I set my alarm for 0145 and went to bed at about 2100. Waking for the flight was unpleasant as expected, but we updated our brief with

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weather and scenario info, then we proceeded to the flight deck. The night was unusually quiet as we walked to the jet; the helo hadn't even started up yet.

Man-up and taxi to the cat were uneventful, save one annoyance: The pilot had to ask me to repeat myself a couple of times. I thought nothing of it, but this minor roadblock to crew coordination could have had major complications. I tuned up button 18 for departure as we had done the previous three days but heard no prelaunch brief. Because an E-2 and our plane were the only ones launching, I wasn't surprised not to hear anything. I made an improper assumption.

I never will forget the next minute of my life. We went into tension, I felt the airplane squat, the pilot turned on the lights, and away we went. All indications were normal. I think I even commented, "Well, that was a good one."

The next thing that happened was a surprise. After the aircraft's wheels reached the deck edge, I felt like we were taking an elevator—down. As I felt the settle, I immediately looked at the AOA. It read 12 units. Normal launch is 15 to 17 units. Next, I looked at the radar altimeter. It was holding steady—then wait, no, it descended slightly.

I said to the pilot, "Pull back." No response. Then again, "Pull back. Backstick."

I did not grab the stick, although, if I ever see those indications again, I will be spring loaded to pull it back.

The last thing I remember is catching a hint of the ocean's bioluminescence out the corner of my right eye. I could see whitecaps crashing. I knew we were low, but the next thing I felt was the jet pitching up and climbing safely away.

As a crew, we discussed the "settle off the cat" in the climb, but we didn't mention it again the rest of the flight. For four hours, we searched for and found the bad guy, and we saved the high-value unit (HVU). The pilot had intermittent ICS problems, but we overcame those by yelling and using hand signals. We were rewarded for our work with a beautiful sunrise, and my nugget pilot brought us home safely for one last trap. We shared a sigh of relief.

However, we quickly learned just how close we had come to hitting the water. The boss gave us a detailed lecture on how to properly rotate a Viking off the cat shot. His words were accented by PLAT camera footage of a taillight, barely visible from the tower, hovering just even with the deck-edge along the bow cats. The boss had told us over the radio to rotate, and some ship's company felt compelled to initiate their SAR procedures. Apparently, we scared everybody who had watched us at least 10 times as much as we had scared ourselves.

The moral of this story is clear. For pilots, external audio input from NFOs, the boss, and LSOs is designed to keep you alive. Do not compromise your communications abilities because you think you can "handle it."

For all aircrew, remember every flight could be the last in your career or the last thing you ever do. Contemplate this simple observation: No one ever had a mishap by colliding with the sky.

Lt. Potocko flew with VS-35.